Murderland

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Murderland

by TigerPrawn

Summary

Will Graham has been obsessed with serial killers for as long as he can remember. He practically thinks like them. But he's not an awkward teen anymore and he really needs to get over this silly obsession and start acting like an adult. And the best way to do that? Spending all his savings on the totally immersive role play holiday package as one last indulgence.

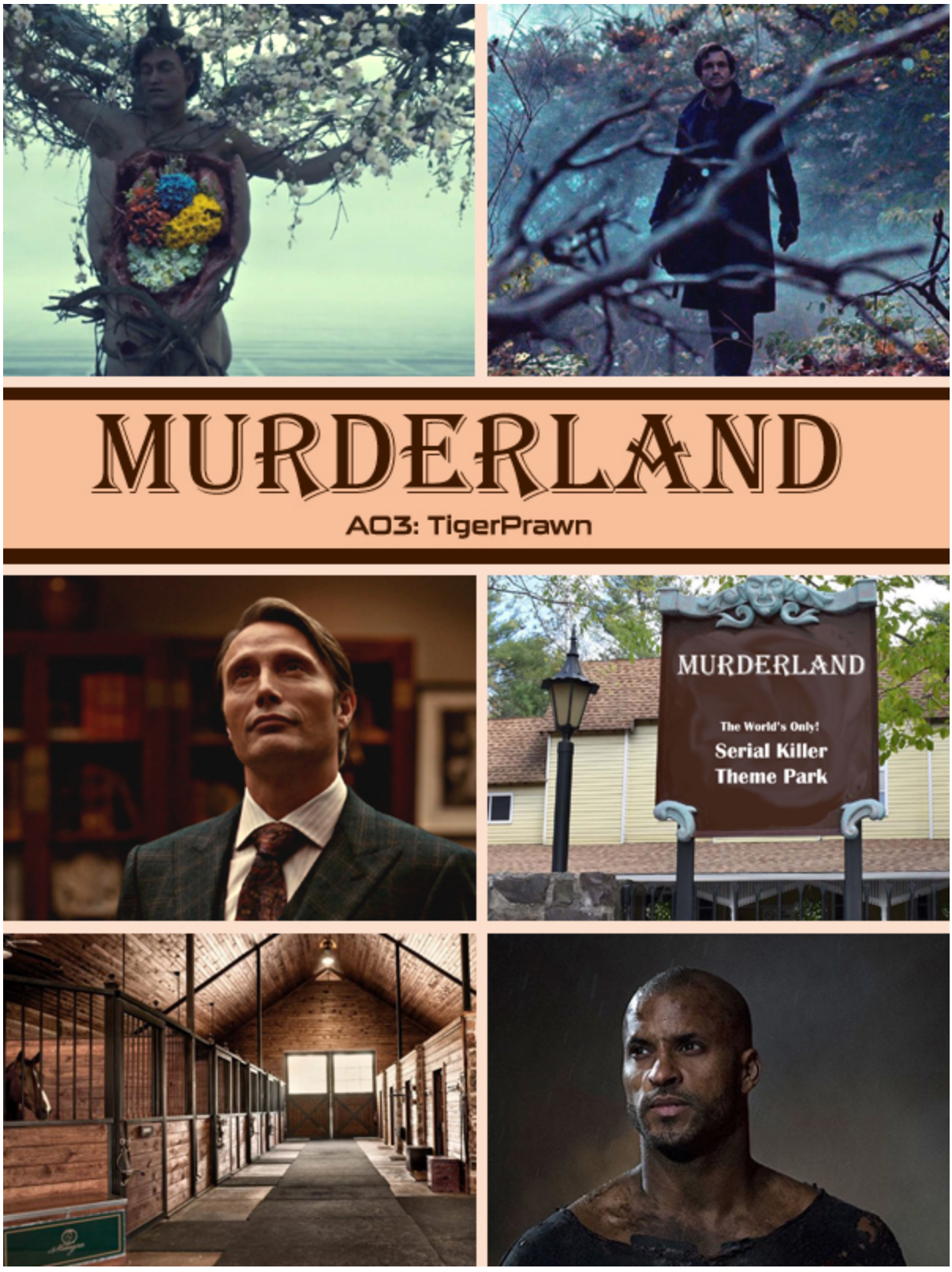
With such greats as The Monster of Florence, The Tooth Fairy and The Chesapeake Ripper on the current lineup, Will can hardly contain his excitement. But as more mysterious characters are introduced and when a body drops (twice!), Will isn't sure where the lines between reality and fiction begin to blur.

Who is a hero? Who is a villain? And what might Will become before he returns from Murderland?

Notes

This fic originally came from a conversation in Feb 2018, when @Kateera was visiting for RDC and we got snowed in on a day out and stranded in a different city. We were talking about the movie Austenland - which starred Ricky Whittle - which is about an immersive Austen themed theme-park/game. So the idea of the Murderland was born, also with Ricky (this time as Shadow Moon from American Gods), and of course, serial killers rather than regency folk. Enjoy!

Chapter 1



Will looked over the brochure. It was a new one, printed earlier that year according to the information at the bottom, and so the prices were up to date... and expensive.

This was going to cost all of his savings. Which he had already assumed, but the reality of it was something different.

He thought about the many conversations he'd had with his friend Molly - the only person who knew the real and full extent of his obsession. This was something he *had* to do, even she kept telling him that. He could rebuild his savings another time, especially if he was able to eventually get promoted. If he quit daydreaming, stopped obsessing over the criminology degree he never took, the life in investigation that never happened… stopped fantasising about what it might be like to catch a killer. Yes, then he might get that promotion.

And maybe Molly was right? The best way to exorcise the obsession and finally get over it, move on and improve his life by accepting it for what it was, was a full immersion roleplay experience.

Will let out a sigh as he flumped down onto the couch. He'd been fascinated by serial killers since he was a kid, his parents had even sent him to therapy for a while. Doctor Du Maurier had actually been quite cool - she understood that he wasn't some kind of troubled teen acting out, just someone with a keen interest in something others considered dark or taboo. But then, he had never really explained everything to her. He had never told anyone the fact that he could think just like serial killers - practically predict what they were going to do next when he was reading case files or there was a news item about a killer at large. It wasn't as if he necessarily had the same urges, but he could understand them. Empathise with them.

It only deepened his obsession - the idea of being able to connect with someone, understand someone and perhaps have them understand him. Maybe not a serial killer, that was surely unthinkable? Maybe someday in the future he would meet someone he could connect with in that way, or so he told himself through his teens. But it never happened and his obsession continued to have a firm hold on him.

It made dating impossible - no one was interested in someone with such 'strange interests', as they perceived them. And he wasn't interested in someone he didn't feel he would find that connection with. Not that that mattered - even the dates that found his interest amusing and quirky were quickly freaked out by their depths.

Doctor Du Maurier had once said that he could be easily perceived as a twitchy little man when viewed through the lens of his interests. He was sure it was her way of saying he might come off as a creep to those who didn't taken the time to get to really know him - which was pretty much everyone. Molly was his only real friend, and she had shared his keen interest when they were kids - going through her goth phase and trying to enrage her parents. But she had grown out of it and moved onto a new, more consuming interest in sports. And the baseball player she then married.

This trip wasn't a bad idea. One last hurrah to get it out of his system. Before he too, at the age of 29, had to grow up and leave behind these fantasies of what life might have been and engage with what it was. This obsession wasn't doing him any good in trying to get his promotion at the security firm. His superiors considered him a weirdo, which he didn't much care about on a personal level, but he was fed up of getting overlooked. There were people nowhere near as qualified as him being promoted over him to personal security and other more interesting work than mall patrol, and he was sick of it.

Will looked down at the brochure again and the package that would cost all of his savings - the FBI package. He would get to solve the crime and discover which of the other guests - all actors - was the killer. The story for the package was that of a modern murder mystery: people trapped at a hotel by a storm, the discovery of a body, the arrival of the FBI and all the thrill and intrigue that came with that. His role would be as a special consultant, a profiler brought in to help.

He pulled his laptop from his bag and went to their website, looking at available dates for cheap enough flights that matched open dates for the FBI package.

One month.

It was all booked and he had one month to wait until he was there, immersed in Murderland.

*

It had felt like one long, unending day when Will took his flight to Baltimore. He'd barely slept and then had to change flights twice to get the best priced tickets. He was tired and travel weary, he just wanted a shower and a rest. He was glad, at least, that it took very little time to get the cab from the airport out to the Murderland hotel. Not that it was called that. It was called Starling House and Golf Resort on maps and the main entrance, the *Welcome to Murderland* only appeared on the horizon a moment before the house became visible down the long driveway.

It was an old colonial style house that had been moderately renovated. It sat at the edge of a large golf course that many years earlier had been manicured gardens. The hotel and golf course having been bought several years earlier for Murderland, which was essentially designated a theme park. There was a gravel drive up to the house, several miles from the main road, that ended in a circular drive edged by nicely cut lawns and small flower borders. The house itself, in daylight, probably looked like any other of its ilk. In the dimming light of evening it looked like somewhere they would film horror movies. At that, the first thrill of his trip went through Will.

Will had only his small haversack with him, just underwear and toiletries - his clothes would be provided to fit the character he was playing - he'd already had to email over his measurements when booking the trip. He grabbed his bag from the back of the cab and then watched the car speed off before he had stepped up onto the veranda and to the front door.

He had barely knocked when it was flung open by a large man with a gruff voice. "Special Agent Graham, you're here. I've got the case file for you." The man turned and walked back into the house with the clear expectation of Will to follow, so he did. "We talked over email, I'm Jack Crawford, Agent-in-Charge of the Behavioural Science Unit."

Will found himself nodding as he tried to keep up, physically and mentally. The character outline of his *colleague*, along with the emails of which he spoke, had been part of the information he had received once he had booked his trip. Even so, Will hadn't realised any of this would start before he had even checked in.

As if reading his mind Jack Crawford added, "The field office isn't far from here so we're all staying at this hotel. You can check in and get settled - read over the file. We can't do much else until daylight now, but we need to get out to the crime scene as soon as day breaks. One of the team will drive you out at first light." Jack rumbled.

He turned and then pointed Will to the deserted reception desk that sat at the end of the long hallway they had just walked.

"You can check-in there. There are a few other guests - suspects - we've asked them to remain whilst we continue our investigations. They might not be involved but we aren't ruling anything out at this point. I'd like you to start interviewing them tomorrow."

There was the briefest of pauses during which Will took the opportunity to nod his affirmation.

Crawford gave a curt nod in return. "Good, thanks for coming Will. We could really use expertise like yours on this." He added before reaching out his hand. Will shook it, his hand gripped tight by the larger man before he turned and walked off, leaving Will at reception.

Will took a moment to take a breath. He wasn't sure what he had expected but this was fantastic! The hotel, Jack Crawford, the case file! He opened it and flicked through it, finding authentic looking case notes and a few photos. He couldn't wait to get to his room and start reading it. Maybe he should ring the bell?

He looked up, his hand already reaching for the bell when he realised someone had appeared behind the counter. Will jumped a little, just as taken aback by the man's smarmy smile as his actual presence.

"Good evening." The man grinned at him as he shuffled some papers and put them out on the counter. "My name is Frederick Chilton - I'm the proprietor of this madhouse-" he paused and chuckled at, what was apparently a joke, before continuing "-if I could just ask you to sign these release forms I will then get you checked in."

Will looked down at the small stack of papers - these were all waivers and other official paperwork relating to him partaking in the *experience*, and essentially saying he wouldn't sue them if he was unsatisfied with his experience or was injured in any way.

Will read through them quickly and signed them all before passing them back.

"Wonderful, thank you, Will. May I call you Will?" Chilton didn't wait for an answer before handing a large padded envelope across to him. "This is the package you had sent over."

Will took it but didn't open it, feeling clearly through the padded envelope the outline of a handgun. This must be his ID kit.

"Your luggage is already in your room." Chilton said as he rummaged for a room key and then pulled it out, a key with a large wooden keyring emblazoned with the room number - seven. "Would you like me to show you up?"

Will looked at the man who was smiling in a way that even Will found creepy. He would consider whether Chilton was one of the potential killers of this game, but knew the name from the brochure. Frederick Chilton was the creator, owner and manager of the theme park. Not at all what Will had expected. Perhaps he had expected more eccentric old man than used car salesman.

"I'll find my way, thanks." Will replied, gruffer than he had intended, but in a way that he felt actually suited Will Graham - FBI Special Agent.

"Do call down if you need anything. Day or night." Chilton smiled again and Will gave a curt nod, taking his package and room key.

*

"Oh, pardon me."

Will was taken aback by the smartly dressed man that he passed in the small hallway. They had bumped into each other - literally - as Will had tried to open his door and the man was exiting the opposite door across the hall room eight. Their doors were opposite and at the end of the hallway, one that ended with a large sash window that over looked the grounds. Not that he could see much as the sun was going down.

Everything about him was immaculate and his accent was some strand of European. Eastern Europe, to Will's ear but he hadn't much frame of reference. French was about the only thing he was versed in on that front, knowing the difference between native French and the creole speakers of his hometown.

"My fault." Will said. "Couldn't get the key in."

"Ah yes, these locks are a bit... antiquated." The man smiled how Will imaged a shark might - and it was thrilling. This had to be one of the suspects! How the hell did they find someone who seemed so utterly dangerous and captivating? This guy was one hell of an actor, Will was sure. "Here..." The man reached passed him, moving close against him as he took hold of the key in the lock and rattled it slightly before turning it. This time it clicked open.

"Thank you, uh, Mister?"

"Doctor." The man corrected with a smile Will could only describe as predatory, before holding out his hand to shake. Will moved his package to his other hand and accepted the warm, and gentle press of the other man's hand.

"Doctor Hannibal Lecter. I'm afraid I've been caught up in all this awful business. I was in town for a conference, but now the FBI have asked us to remain whilst they carry out their investigation. Understandable, if inconvenient." He clasped Will's hand as he spoke, only releasing it slowly, letting it peel away as he asked, "I assume you are one of their ranks?"

"Ah, yes." Will started. He cleared his throat and drew himself up a little, sinking into his new alter ego. "Special Agent Will Graham. I'm a profiler, I consult on special cases."

"Fascinating. As a psychiatrist, I have consulted now and then on investigations with law enforcement, including the FBI - profiling. It is... interesting to be the otherside of one of these investigations." Doctor Lecter let out a light chuckle, his response seeming to say that he found this whole experience very entertaining, if pointless.

Will found himself smiling in return, as though drawn out by the man's charm. He wasn't sure if it was the man himself, the situation or a combination of both, that had him so at ease with himself. This was not the sort of interaction he ever usually had in his day to day life. Maybe it was part of being away from the reality of his usual existence? The thought sobered him and reminded him that this was just an *experience*, a game.

Before his smile had chance to falter, Doctor Lecter continued, "Well, Agent Graham, I shall let you settle in and I will know doubt see you over the next few days." The doctor gave a polite nod before setting off down the hallway. Will watched him go, hoping that he definitely would see the man, despite having to remind himself that none of this was real.

Doctor Hannibal Lecter was not a serial killer, and any connection they made here was only part of a game. When the time would come to leave, he risked leaving emptier than ever. Maybe this might not be as good an idea as he had thought.

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Will's evening had been spent reading and unpacking *his* luggage. Trousers, shirts and jacket. In his envelope was his sidearm and holster, his FBI ID and cell phone pre-programmed with the numbers of various field agents from what he could tell.

The case file Crawford had given him to read was packed with newspaper clippings and various crime scene reports, along with three profiles of as yet unapprehended serial killers thought to be at large in the area.

They were all actually real life killers that had never been caught. Some of whom were still active, and he had read about at length. This drew him back in, gave him focus and made him feel like part of the scenario unfolding around him. “Clever,” he huffed to himself. They knew their clientele.

It was clear to Will what the game wanted from him - what the FBI wanted from Special Agent Graham - was to ascertain which of these three killers was the perpetrator of their crime scene. And which of the actors at the hotel was that guilty killer. It sent a thrilling chill through him as he read the profiles he already knew so well.

*

Will was up with the sun and decided to head out to the field office without waiting for one of Crawford's people to collect him. Really, he wanted to see the crime scene alone if he could. If they had done a good job of setting it up, which reviews suggested they would have, he was curious as to how much he could intuit from it as a real agent might.

"Agent Graham." Chilton's voice rang down the hallway as Will went to let himself out the backdoor. "If you aren't partaking of the breakfast, perhaps I could get you a coffee to go?"

He made a flourish with his hand to a side room and Will followed the action. Looking in to see a few agents and several civilians sitting eating breakfast in the bright breakfast room. Doctor Lecter sat alone, legs crossed at the knee as he sipped a coffee and read a newspaper.

Will was torn for a moment. He could easily admit to himself the pull of the man, the hint of a connection he longed for - even if it was fake. He was here to enjoy himself, let himself go and see what happened. Then leave it all and go home. He realised he was staring intently at Lecter's delicately curved lips as he sipped at his drink. *What happens in Murderland, stays in Murderland?*

Chilton cleared his throat. The noise attracted the attention of a few of the dinners, including Lecter, who looked up, a smile spreading as he caught Will's gaze. Will felt his cheeks heat. This might be fake, but he wasn't good with people, and being nothing but a themepark wouldn't change that. Will looked away, back to Chilton, his mind reeling through whether he could actually handle connecting with anyone here. Enjoying the company of people that seemed like minded only for it all to be fake in the end could be worse than his usual lack of dates.

"I'm fine, thank you." Will finally answered when Chilton quirked a brow.

"Very well. I will have one of the staff take you out in a golf cart. The crime scene is out there, next to the 12th hole. They've set up the field office there too." Chilton informed him as they began to walk.

Will nodded and resisted looking back at Doctor Lecter as Chilton lead them out the back door and around the side of the hotel where a couple of golf buggies were parked, being valeted by staff.

"It's not too far to walk but the course is somewhat boggy after the storm we had." Chilton dropped in the reference to the extreme - and fake - weather front that set the scene for the game. Will gave only a curt nod in response. There was a heaviness in the air that almost made it feel like there actually had been a storm. Or that one was imminent. There was a freshness that bordered on chilly and the sky was cloudy. Ominous.

Chilton made sure he was settled into a buggy and driven out across the golf course behind the hotel, and towards the crime scene. The field office became quickly apparent - a large white tent, another smaller tent and then a smaller covered area just enough away from the tents to clearly be the actual crime scene. There were a couple of officers in FBI jackets roaming the place, but otherwise it was empty, the sun only just lighting enough of the sky to be called daylight.

"This will do." Will said as the buggy neared the crime scene. His driver - Margot according to her name badge - slowed to a stop and turned in a wide circle once Will stepped off. He looked over at the large tent and the few people there, none paying him any mind. He walked under the tarp covering and got his first glimpse of the crime he was to solve.

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The pendulum cut across his vision. Sweeping away thought and bringing him focus.

The victim was a young, white male. His body had been planted along with the tree that entwined around him. Flowers grew from his gaping chest and his eyes were replaced with shards of mirrors so that Will could see himself reflected there.

The man's mouth was twisted into a gruesome smile, post-mortem it would seem, and with intent. His skin was covered in raw bite marks, the size of a grown man, but deformed.

Will recreated the crime scene in his mind, someone working to create this tree man, but then a shadowy figure. A second person? The MO was confusing - a mixture of those he had read in his room. Was that part of the game or was it just a poor special effect? Could this be the work of more than one killer? Was it meant to be?

The confusion brought Will from his imagination, and despite the inconsistencies with it, he couldn't help but admire the scene. He wanted to touch it. It looked so real. His heart was racing and his breath caught in his chest. It was a work of art, more so than any crime scene he had ever seen in pictures.

It was beautiful.

"You're Will Graham." A voice behind him informed him, pulling him completely from his reverie to turn and look at her. "You wrote the standard monograph on time of death by insect activity."

Will blinked, coming back to reality - this version of reality - with a thud at the interruption to his thoughts. It took him a moment to remember that what she said was true, according to his character profile. Even so he continued to stare at her somewhat blankly.

"CSI Katz, Bev Katz. Glad to have you onboard. We're in need of your expertise." She smiled, turning to walk to the bigger tent. A backward glance told him he was supposed to follow.

Will tried to shake the thrill he'd felt looking at the crime scene, as he followed Katz towards the field office. He could see Crawford there, amongst the several other agents now present. He was shouting at someone, bellowing orders and looking pretty pissed off.

"Don't worry about Jack. He's... shouty." Katz said in a reassuring tone. Will nodded, not phased in the least. He was sure there were some who felt that was part of the job and experience they should have, but as always Will's focus was solely on the killer.

As they approached, Jack turned to them. "So Graham, what do you make of it?"

"Certainly there are aspects that fit all three of the profiles you gave me. I assume the potential of a copycat has been considered?"

Jack nodded. "That's why you're here. Our theories so far are a change or evolution of MO for one of those killers, or a copycat. Some sort of avid fan picking and choosing what they liked from the previous murders of their inspiration."

Will nodded. It made sense. The tableau didn't quite fit any of them completely, but had enough of their hallmarks to potentially be any of the killers in his case file, if they'd had reason to change their MO.

"Changes in design like this are usually an escalation or necessity." Will said, letting Jack lead him into the large tent where a few tables were set up with evidence gathered from the crime scene and a portable lab which Katz was now stood at. "None of the changes here seem to be necessity. If there was a reason to hurry or adapt to an unusual situation we might see the same MO but on a practical level things done differently, different materials used than usual, maybe some sloppy work. We wouldn't usually see additions."

Jack was nodding. "The eyes. Yeah. It could almost be the Chesapeake Ripper, but that isn't his style at all, and we have seen it several times from kills we believe to be the Tooth Fairy. It makes no sense that either of them would include each other's... design, as you said."

“The flowers and artistry of the tableau could almost fit Il Mostro, but he always kills couples. So unless there is another body close by, I believe we can count him out for now,” Will mused.

Jack nodded again as they walked over to a large table that had been set up with photos of the crime scene, more up on a board next to it. "Copy cat has to be the leading theory for now." Jack said, gesturing to the photos as though they proved his point.

"There is another possibility. Though, probably the least likely..." Will started.

"Anything is welcome on the table at this point. We want to get to the bottom of this before any more bodies drop. We want to get ahead of this, hopefully catch this guy before he decides to recreate any other tableaux."

"Could two of them, or all three of them be working together?"

Jack stopped and looked at him, studying him as though trying to work out whether he was serious. “Shit.” He finally muttered and shook his head. “We need to think about that… I really hope that these maniacs aren't teaming up." Jack picked up some notes and handed them to Will. "This is what the lab team have come up with so far - no prints, nothing of note. But maybe you can..." he waved his hands instead of finishing his words and Will nodded.

"I'll see if I can get anything from it." Will folded the notes into the case file inside his satchel. He felt a little let down - from the crime scene it really did seem like all three working together. And whilst that might be an half interesting plot in a cheap thriller novel, it wasn't the taxing and complex story he had hoped to be part of. Maybe the greater mystery would be working out who the killers were from the people on site?

"In the meantime, I have some people for you to interview. Everyone that was at the hotel when the murder took place. We've held them there. They have already given statements but we'd like you to talk with each of them, see if anything jumps out, before we release them. There's only so long we can ask them to indulge us now the storm has passed."

"Of course." Will nodded, following as Jack led the way back out of the tent and gestured towards one of the crime scene team to grab a golf cart. "They are all guests and staff of the hotel?"

"Yeah. Three guests, Chilton and two staff. Would have been more but it's off season so the golf course is closed."

Will nodded, taking that in for future assessment of its relevance.

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Chilton had taken a long time to interview. He had kept asking questions about Will as though it were a two way conversation. A date not an interrogation. Either way Will was satisfied the man had no knowledge of the murder before it's discovery. He had been playing chess with one of the guests - a Doctor Gideon. There was something definitely odd going on with the man, and Will stored that away to think on later, all too aware that it could be something in Chilton's real life and not his role in this game that might be what he was picking up on.

After interviewing Chilton in his office, Will asked if he could have a private space to interview the guests and staff. Chilton had settled him in the now closed dining room and a member of the FBI team started to bring people to Will one at a time in his makeshift interview room.

The first had been Margot Verger, the polite lady who was the grounds manager, and had driven him out to the crime scene earlier that day. And, she was clearly hiding something but Will was unclear whether it was part of her act for this game or something within the game itself. Either way, she had an alibi, which was confirmed by the next person Will interviewed - Alana Bloom the housekeeper. Both women had been together at a bar in the town when the murder happened and had witnesses to the fact, which Will had one of the FBI team follow up.

This left Will waiting for each of the guests to come in, surprised to see Jack Crawford enter the room instead.

“We have a positive identification on the body. Prints just got back with a hit in the system.” He said, no preamble.

“Yeah?” Will looked up from his notes.

“Mason Verger. Known criminal and brother of the Grounds Manager. You interview her yet?” He was all business and bordering on gruff. Definitely a personality trait and not an act.

“Yes, she has an alibi. It checks out.”

Crawford nodded. “Family was the obvious suspect, but there’s a lot of weird shit going on around here.” He shook his head and started back out. Will knew he was referring to the storm and the stranded guests when the murder happened. All part of the game of the murder

mystery, and it made Will's nerves zing. "Just keep it in mind whilst interviewing the rest of them… Someone had motive to kill Verger and I want to know who."

The door clicked behind Crawford, leaving Will to contemplate before further interviews continued. If Margot Verger wasn't a suspect, the obvious choice, there had to be another reason someone would want to kill him.

One of the FBI team knocked and let in the next interviewee.

Francis Dolarhyde was not happy at being detained in the least. That much was clear from the man's stormy face as he entered the room. He had stalked back and forth across the room whilst being questioned. Like a beast in a cage.

He was angry at the storm stranding him there when he needed to get back to his sick grandmother. He was angry about the inconvenience of the murder and subsequent investigation keeping him there. He was angry that his job had asked him to make a delivery of special film that required expert handling, and resulted in this situation at all.

Will took everything in, absorbing not just the details the man gave but also his performance. If it hadn't been fake then Will wondered if he might actually be more than a little unsettled by the man.

Will felt a little thrill run through him at the conflict. He hadn't really considered it before - that this was more than just a puzzle to solve, a game. It was still an interaction and to solve it there would be obstacles and some of those obstacles might be people.

By contrast, Dr Abel Gideon was laid back and charming and also had an alibi - he had been playing chess much of the evening with Chilton, as Will already knew.

The man was pleasant if blasé, he didn't seem phased by the circumstances, merely a little put out that the situation was costing him time with patients that he would have to rearrange later. He did comment that he had seen plenty of death and dying in his time as a physician and that at least in this case he was happy to not be responsible - as this wasn't at all like losing a patient. All in all he baffled Will a little.

There was something out of sync with him, and Will was pretty sure that it wasn't part of the game. He thought it might be worth mentioning to Chilton later that perhaps there was something there that should be looked into? But then again, if he was mentally unsound perhaps this was not the right job for the man, but how was that any different from half the shit that followed Will around? It was, after all, his own empathy issues and interests that kept him from being able to join the police force as he had wanted.

Will felt a warmth rise from his chest and creep up his neck when Doctor Lecter entered the room, walking toward him like an animal stalking its prey before unbuttoning his suit jacket and dropping into the chair opposite him. He crossed his legs at the knee and sat back, the picture of calm as he waited.

Will looked down at his notes trying to consider his words before saying them, feeling like he might otherwise just come out with gibberish. Which was, he completely acknowledged,

ridiculous. But then, there was that sense of a potential connection and the fact that the man was attractive. Or, more accurately, that Will was attracted to him.

"You missed breakfast." Lecter said casually, making polite conversation before Will could say anything.

"I wasn't hungry." Will didn't look up, feeling the back of his neck heat and his skin prickle under the man's attentions. He cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses before finally looking up.

Lecter's smile was like that of a wolf and for a moment Will found himself forgetting it was a game. Mostly because he desperately *wanted* to forget it was a game. He'd never had someone look at him with that kind of hunger before. Lust?

"I'm always hungry first thing, and breakfast *is* the most important meal of the day, so they say." Lecter's lips curled into a smile, Will noted as he looked up only that far. Leading Lecter to comment, "Not found of eye contact are you." It was a statement rather than a question and it caught Will off guard for it's personal nature.

Will's mouth was dry. He swallowed before forcing himself to look up at the doctor.

"Eyes are distracting. You see too much. You don't see enough. And it's hard to focus when you're thinking those whites are really white or they must have hepatitis, or is that a burst vein? So I try to avoid eyes whenever possible."

It was a deflection, and something in Lecter's smile told Will he knew that.

"I imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind. Your values and decency are present yet shocked at your associations, appalled at your dreams. No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love." Hannibal's smile continued and Will found it disarming.

Fuck. The man had just described him to the letter, seen him more clearly than anyone ever had. And that *couldn't* be part of the game.

"I… Uh…" Will looked away, cursing the blush he felt rising on his cheeks.

"I apologise Will, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. Observing is what we do. I can't shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off." His name fell easily from Lecter's mouth with almost a dare to be told not to address him so familiarly.

Will let out a shuddering breath and looked directly at the doctor then, holding his gaze. He wanted to seem defiant, but knew from Lecter's smile that he didn't. Because he wasn't defiant. He was awed by this stranger being able to read him so clearly when no one ever had before. Maybe he really was a shrink?

Lecter cocked his head slightly, amused smile still playing over his lips, "Tell me Will, do you always blush so easily?" The words were soft, almost a purr. Not the taunt they might have been.

Will swallowed again. He was the weird kid, people never flirted with him. And he was sure this was what was happening, even if it was completely fake. Something here was fake. The flirting or the connection? Or both. Surely Lecter really couldn't see him so completely as it seemed?

Will clenched his jaw and brought himself back to the game that was afoot.

"At the risk of sounding rude, Dr Lecter, you are here to answer my questions, not the other way around."

"Of course, Will." He gave a polite nod and the smile turned into a wolfish grin.

Will cleared his throat again. "What was your business in the area before the storm hit?"

"I was at a conference, the same as Dr Gideon actually. We both appear to have had the idea of staying at this lovely remote setting rather than the hotel in town where the conference was being held. Much to our detriment it would seem."

"Do you know Doctor Gideon well?"

"No, not at all actually. Other than by reputation of course. Polite nods over breakfast once we recognised each other from the conference, but no more than that."

Will nodded and made notes. "Do you know a Mr Mason Verger, local of these parts?"

Lecter paused for a second as though thinking. "I don't believe I do. I understand Verger to be the surname of the groundskeeper, but other than that I have had no exposure to the name that I am aware of." Lecter paused again, tongue slipping out and running over his teeth before he continued in a noncommittal tone, "Is he the victim?"

Unsure what information he should or shouldn't share at this stage and feeling the back up of many years worth of watching crime dramas, Will answered simply, "I'm not at liberty to say."

Lecter's mouth twitched up into a smile that seemed a little more than devious. "Of course. If that's everything?"

Lecter started to stand and Will felt as though he was being dismissed and that made him feel... hollow. There was part of him that wanted to continue talking to Lecter, bring the conversation back around to more personal matters. Get to know each other. But Will would never have done that usually, much less in this circumstance. Yes, he wasn't himself here and had no need to be, he could be that confident person if he pushed himself. But the fact that it would mean nothing, be *for* nothing, held him back.

Lecter buttoned his suit jacket again before holding out his hand to shake.

"Please let me know if there is anything else I can do to assist you." He crooned as Will held out his hand and they shook, Lecter's thumb briefly caressing the back of his hand before they parted and the doctor walked from the room.

*

Will spent the rest of the day reading background information on Verger and creating a chart in the field office of his connections to people and their possible motives. So far there was little of nothing. The only real connection was Margot Verger and she had an alibi, and there were no clear motives for anyone at all other than a desire to kill. Perhaps he had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time? Though that seemed trite for a storyline, it really couldn't be as simple as that.

When he got back to the hotel, Chilton told him he had missed the evening meal but that he would send a plate up to his room, which Will had accepted. He ended up eating alone whilst wondering what it might be like to not eat alone. Lecter was just across the hallway, after all.

After he'd eaten, Will went outside for some fresh air. It wasn't that the intrusive thoughts of Hannibal Lecter were overwhelming so much as unexpected. *Was* Lecter's flirting all part of the game? He wasn't sure. And did he care? He could enjoy it for the nothing it was, or he could try to avoid the mind fuck and shut it down.

As he rounded the side of the hotel he noted the outbuildings to the side, off from the drive down to the golf course, and headed in that direction. It wasn't until he got a little closer in his idle wanderings that he noticed the small light from one slatted window. Curious, he continued towards it until he heard the gentle braying of horses and saw the shadow of a person cross the light.

He froze for a moment, every nerve now attuned to this life he was leading - this game of investigation. Was this part of it? And if so, was something nefarious occurring? The killer hiding perhaps? Had the stables already been searched for any signs of the murderer's tools? He wasn't sure and didn't have his notes to hand, he'd been focused on trying to get alibis or clear those stranded at the hotel.

The shadow moved again, the bounce and swish of hair in a ponytail, accompanied by a soft, feminine laugh. Will continued, hand on his sidearm, flicking the catch but not unholstering it.

As he drew closer he could make out more than the shadow - the woman, no, two women. They were standing close, laughing and talking quietly, as they brushed down a dappled brown horse.

One looked over and he instantly recognised her, and by association the woman with her back to him - Margot and Alana. They swiftly but casually stepped back from each other.

"Agent Graham, what brings you out here?" Alana Bloom asked, turning to him. Margot started packing up the grooming kit and moved out from the stable stall to shelf it in the main body of the building.

"Just taking a stroll." Will replied, removing his hand from his sidearm and loosening up.

"I'm going to head off, I shall see you tomorrow." Margot popped her head in and smiled at them both before departing. Alana nodded and gave a smile and then made her way to the

side of the stall to talk to Will through the window there.

"I was hoping to talk with you alone sometime." She cooed, her temperament altered and Will was unsure then whether this was her changing to or from the game.

"Is there something I can help with?" He asked, half expecting a deluge of information pertinent to the case. Instead she started to tear up a little, holding a hand to her chest as though to control her emotions.

"I... I just..." She opened the door and stepped outside the stall so they were next to each other, she moved the hand from her chest and placed it lightly on his arm. "It gets very lonely here, and... I must admit, perhaps it's the tragic events at play, but I... I feel rather drawn to you. Your strength, your comfort and intelligence."

Will swallowed. Hard.

He may not have had much experience with flirting, but he'd had some with ridicule - faux flattery in order to make fun of him. His teen years had been full of the stuff. The cute, popular girls in high school, and later even some of the jocks when they thought they might have guessed something of his preferences. But all just a cruel taunt in order to make fun of him.

Just a game. He reminded himself, whilst a cool darkness bubbled inside. This had to be part of the game and he was sure it couldn't be to ridicule him. He thought of the package he had bought, hints to solving the crime and getting the girl tropes suddenly making more sense.

He was a little startled when she leaned in and pressed her lips to his, chaste.

Will gently eased her back, their lips parting as softly as they had come together.

"I'm confused," Will admitted with a frown. They'd had one conversation and that had been his questioning her. This was definitely some shoddy storytelling. But that did seem to be the way of heterosexual romance. The fact that they had part A and slot B genitalia predisposed them to instant love, apparently.

"You have to stop thinking so much," Alana replied with a slight giggle that did nothing to hide her annoyance at his lack of cooperation. She surged forward again, but he leaned back from her clutches, stepping aside from her.

"No... um, thanks, but no." Was all Will could manage before he turned and walked off, not at all pleased by this turn of events.

*

Will had slept fitfully. His dreams were full of angst. His sheets were soaked with sweat when he woke, his mind still reeling from a dream where all the people he had met over the last day were actually people from his high school and his job. All taunting him and making jokes at his expense. He shuddered at the thought.

The sun was barely up, it was well over an hour until breakfast would be served, but sleep wasn't going to return. So Will had a shower, dressed and then decided to go for a walk to clear his head.

He was halfway down the hallway when a whispered voice called to him. "Agent Graham."

He turned and saw Hannibal Lecter just coming out of his own room and locking the door behind him.

"Do you mind if I walk with you? I am an early riser and whilst stuck here I have found myself at a loose end as to how to fill the time I would have otherwise occupied in my own kitchen." Lecter spoke quietly, considerately given that many were likely still sleeping. His smile was, as always, disarming. Will gave a curt nod and continued, his skin prickling at the thought of the man walking so close behind him.

When they got to the bottom of the stairs, Lecter swept a hand to indicate the front door. "There are some rather lovely gardens if you would like to take a stroll?"

Will nodded again and let Lecter lead the way out. They walked in silence across the gravel driveway at the front of the house and then off to the side where some ornate and manicured gardens sat on the opposite side of the house from the golf course.

"Beautiful and untouched." Lecter said, his words a quiet rumble that sent a shiver over Will's skin.

"What?" Will felt himself flush with embarrassment that this man drew out in him.

"The gardens. They escaped the building of the golf club." There was something to the man's smirk that told Will he had enjoyed, likely intended, the misunderstanding of his comment.

Will let out a heavy sigh. After his run-in with Alana and the dreams that still shadowed his mind, he wasn't sure he could do this.

“Alana Bloom kissed me last night.” He blurted.

Lecter raised a brow at him, but then chuckled, “You are very kissable.”

Will stopped in his tracks and frowned. He might have blushed again only his anger kept it at bay.

“Please, don’t make fun of me,” it was a quiet request.

“Will…” Lecter breathed his name. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, And, I’m sorry if Alana made you feel uncomfortable she shouldn’t have… Chilton shouldn’t…” He shook his head.

“Shouldn’t have?” Will pressed.

Lecter sighed, pausing as though trying to decide what to divulge. “It’s an option on the package, a sort of extra. If the participant seems receptive to a love interest…” Lecter

flourished his hand to indicate Will fill in the blanks.

Will couldn't help the bark of laughter, mirthless as it was. "So they had Alana throw herself at me?" He shook his head. "Poor Alana, that's kind of awful." He thought back to what now he realised was happy flirtation between her and Margot. Ah, likely the thing Margot was concealing. He shuddered, this place actually gave him the creeps for all the wrong reasons. Or the right ones, depending on how he looked at it.

"It won't end there I'm afraid. If I guess correctly a new guest will arrive soon, one they think might be your preference over Ms Bloom." Lecter seemed to wince.

"Why are you telling me all this? Is this part of some…" Will shrugged emphatically. "Is this part of the game?"

"I'm telling you because I find you interesting, I think you might find me interesting too. And I got the sense that shoehorning a romance into your experience might not be…" He trailed off, considering his words. "I thought it might make you uncomfortable and I regret that I didn't warn you before, or say something to Chilton myself."

Will shook his head, trying very hard to work out what the fuck he had got himself into. What any of this was. What Lecter's part was in all of it. He felt like the fourth wall had been broken and now he had no idea what was reality or fiction with Lecter.

"Look, I... I think you've been flirting with me, and I liked it and didn't care if it was part of this game, because... I guess, from what you say, it's what I paid for, right? But I don't think I can do it. You seem... I thought I would be okay with a... a fling? A holiday romance or whatever this would be. But I'm not. I need something real. The crime, the investigation, that's one thing. That is fantasy fulfilment I guess, but..." He shrugged, looking down at his feet. "I..."

A gentle finger tucked under his chin and lifted, bringing him face to face with Lecter once more, before the man leaned in and pressed a very soft kiss to his lips.

"Don't do that." Will whispered the admonishment with almost no resolve.

"Kiss you? You are very kissable, this we already established." Lecter chuckled, gently.

Will shook his head. "Don't kiss me to shut me up. And... No, don't kiss me at all. I'm not... I already said, I can't deal with this being nothing. I want something real."

Lecter interjected with rumbled words, "I'm real, Will. I felt an instant attraction to you, an instant connection. One that I am sure you felt too."

Will shook his head. "I don't want all this fake bullshit. I *want* a connection, a *real* one! Is that too much to ask for?" His voice rose as he spoke, without any implicit intention. "I came here for the game, to just... get over these stupid ideas I have. I didn't come here for this and I don't want it. I don't want to be teased and taunted by people I could never truly connect with and..."

His words trailed off as lost himself in the depths of Lecter's almost maroon eyes. Something there, something deep in there. He wasn't sure what. Someone that he could connect with? Already had connected with? Maybe Lecter really did mean it and had felt it too?

He shrugged off the thought, it wasn't worth getting his hopes up for. It wasn't real.

Will turned on his heel and stalked back to the hotel, determined to spend the rest of the day immersed in the murder mystery, as was the intention all along.

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The sound of dripping blood was barely audible, falling as it did on the roughly hewn floor of the stable. It went unheard by all but the horses who whinnied and paced their stalls.

It went unseen by the staff and guests at the hotel.

It went unknown by the figure that approached the hotel on foot. His appearance dishevelled as he sought shelter in the big house. He arrived on the veranda only moments before the skies cracked and opened. Lightening brightening the dark sky as rain started to fall in fat drops that soaked the earth.

The proprietor opened the door. "Ah, Mr Moon. We have a room ready for you."

The rain water ran over the grounds, heavily enough to flood under the door of the stables and mingle with the blood. It drained it out through the door, soaking the earth red, though in the moonlight it looked black.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

“I'm just about worn out with you crazy sons of bitches”

If anything was going to make this whole thing seem authentic, it was the arrival of the biggest storm Will had ever seen.

At first, in his half asleep haze, he thought that it was part of the fiction. That someone was simulating the rain, wind and other effects. As he woke fully, he realised that even a big budget movie wasn’t able to create a massive storm this real without some CGI.

The thunder and lightning appeared to have woken everyone in the hotel, and it raged for hours. He could hear movement as people woke and left their rooms, clearly also unable to sleep.

Will sat up in bed and dragged over the case notes to read over, resigned to the fact that he wasn’t going to get back to sleep. But when the lights flickered and cut out, almost all of them ended up down in the hotel bar, waiting it out and unable to sleep through it as windows banged and part of the roof in the stairwell began to leak.

Will wasn't sure why he felt compelled to join them all, curiosity maybe, but at exactly what he couldn't say. The lounge-come-bar was dotted with candles but the majority of the light was provided by the roaring fire in the room’s large fireplace. It was a comfortable setting, warm with overstuffed furniture and a couple of small tables set up for card and board games.

He sat with Bev Katz, who rambled on at him about something funny Zeller or Price had done. He wasn’t paying attention enough to take in which. Mostly he was taking in everyone else around him. A few of the FBI people had gathered at the tables, one playing chess, the other poker. Alana and Margot sat at the actual bar, clearly trying not to look as though they were sitting as close to each other as they in fact were. Dolarhyde, Gideon and Lecter were all absent.

The atmosphere was strange, furtive glances here and there with a clear sense of no one knowing whether or not they should stay in character because this was so off script. Will wondered whether the faux crime scene would even be there in the morning after all the rain. It was pretty unlikely. So was it all over then?

At one point he saw Chilton wandering about giving people meaningful looks and receiving a few eye rolls in return, which Will was sure was an indication that, yes, they were all to stay in character. The game was still on until Chilton said otherwise.

With the violent but steady patter of rain on the glass and a tumbler of whiskey in his hand, Will was actually starting to nod off again in the large sofa he shared with Katz.

He must have dozed for a moment because when he realised his eyes were closed, he opened them to see Hannibal Lecter had taken Bev's seat next to him on the sofa.

"Will, can I apologise for earlier? I thought… I misread the situation and I am very sorry for that. As I said, I don't want you to feel uncomfortable." Lecter looked sincere.

Maybe it was the strange evening - or rather middle of the night? Maybe it was the uncertainty of whether or not the game was still in play? But Will couldn't help but narrow his eyes and go on the defensive.

"This isn't real, is it?" He hissed the words quietly, for only Hannibal to hear. "You told me about Alana to gain my trust, but you're just like her aren't you? Another set up. You're not really interested, you're just paid to be a holiday fling, you're her *replacement*." Will quietly growled. As indignant as he was, he didn't want others to overhear and witness his humiliation. They probably all knew enough already, Hannibal and Alana likely had been laughing about it during some sort of staff debriefing.

Lecter tilted his head slightly as though considering how to treat him. Like a wild animal, Will was sure.

"My apologies again Will, I can see that this is better discussed in the light of day, when everything is less… surreal." Lecter stood, buttoning his suit jacket as he inclined his head, "good night Will."

Will watched him walk away, feeling more than a little bereft. He hated it, but he really did like the man. He felt the undeniably chemistry there, on his side at least. But maybe he was just interested because Lecter had shown an interest in him? Maybe he was just a good actor and this place was fucking with Will's head? Maybe he should just leave?

He continued to watch after Lecter even as the door closed, the doctor clearly heading back to his room. Will considered for a split second following him and having it out, really trying to work out whether what he was feeling was real, and what that meant. But then Chilton was suddenly stood before him, beaming a slimy smile.

"Special Agent Graham," He began, his tone such that he was clearly trying to indicate to Will that the game definitely was still on, "have you met Mr Moon?"

Chilton made a flourish with his hand and revealed a rather attractive, if harried looking, new arrival.

Will stood, to greet the man, wondering who he was to this situation. Another suspect? Or perhaps a witness?

"Mr Moon," Will inclined his head slightly. Moon held out his hand and Will hesitated, but shook it nonetheless. He was on edge and not really in the mood for these pleasantries. Moon's hand was slightly rough and very firm. But it was the look on his face that captured

Will's interest. Never before had he seen someone attempt, and achieve, looking pensive and alluring at once.

"Please, call me Shadow," the man crooned at him and for a brief moment he thought Shadow might draw his hand up and kiss the back of it. Instead he gave it a squeeze before releasing it and Will felt his cheeks flush hot with the continued attention. It was intense, charming but in the sort of bad boy way that Will wasn't experienced to know if he really liked or not.

Frowning, it wasn't hard to recall Lecter's words about a replacement for Alana. Maybe it wasn't Lecter after all, but this man?

"I'd be remiss in not asking how you happen to be here, Mr Moon. Given that this place is currently an active crime scene." Will smiled how he imagined he would have smiled if all this were real, cynical and impatient.

"Mr Moon is a regular," Chilton spoke before Shadow Moon had half a chance. "He was not here during the, uh, last storm and so not a suspect, but he is here now and stranded with us." Chilton let out a light chuckle, the manner of a man trying to matchmaker in the most awkward way possible. Will wondered if he was always this obvious or just thrown by the unplanned storm.

One thing was for sure, this was definitely Alana's replacement.

"A Special Agent huh?" Shadow Moon asked, clearly trying to get things back on track as he looked subtly impressed with the information and moved closer to Will. "I've already done my time." There was a smoothness to his words, cool.

He was good, so very good at this. Playing a sort of bad boy ruffian turned up in the middle of the night, but with enough charm to woo. The man was ridiculously handsome, and Will couldn't deny his quietly flirtatious manner was charming, if terrifying. All too much for Will and his cheeks burned at the falseness of it.

It might have worked for someone else, but for Will it was just a reminder of exactly what his type was, the sort of person he knew he'd be able to connect to. And bad boy or not, Shadow Moon was not that guy.

His thoughts flashed to Lecter, very different in his flirtations. Will clenched his jaw, at the absurdity of it all and the niggling thought to give into what they seemed to be investing a lot of energy in. Would a holiday fling be that terrible now that he really understood what was going on?

Could he just have a meaningless hookup? Will's eyes lingered over Shadow's mouth a little too long, long enough for the man to realise and lick his lips, before they curved into a smile.

And yet, all Will could think about was Lecter and that perhaps he had been genuinely interested in Will.

The whole thing fucked with his mind.

“I… I’m sorry Mr Moon, I’m very tired. Perhaps we can renew our introductions in the morning?” Will didn’t wait for a reply before heading to the nearest door to make his way upstairs. He planned to spend the rest of the night in his room, even if just to lie there and listen to the rain.

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Sleep had finally claimed Will through the noise of the storm, until the sun had risen a few short hours later and woken him.

It was bright, signalling that the clouds had moved off, and this was confirmed when he looked out the window to survey the area.

From his room he could only see so much, but it was clear the damage was significant. A large amount of the area - lawns and driveway - were flooded to varying degrees. A few smaller trees were down. There was light debris here and there, the perfect picture of the scene Murderland tried to set. Though this was far from fake.

Will was certain the game must be off now, but Chilton was an odd fellow so it was anyone’s guess. Will decided to stay in his room for the morning, figuring that if the game was still on then at some point someone would come and fetch Special Agent Graham for assistance with the murder case.

And in the meantime, he decided to look over all the information again, to see if he might be able to solve the mystery from afar, either way. He had paid to be here after all.

He laid out the papers on his bed - the reports he had been given, his own interview notes - trying to put together a picture. And it all came back to two conclusions: the killers had to be working together; and until they understood the motive, there could be more murders.

This wasn’t so much a conclusion intuited from the situation, of course - because they were all actors and this was all a set up. This came instead from many years of reading, what Will often considered sub-par, murder mysteries.

And this was a poor story. He wondered if Chilton had come up with it himself.

Based on this, his guess was that there would be a second, possibly third, murder that would make clear that the killers were working together. It would seem as though the true intent of the experience was not to figure out why someone committed the murders, but who the murderers actually were and perhaps why they were working together. Those answers would likely then give the motive, if there was one at all. Il Mostro and the Chesapeake Ripper were both renowned for not having a set MO when it came to victim choice.

There were so few suspects, but disregarding the arrival of Shadow Moon, the murderers had to be amongst them. The Chesapeake Ripper, The Tooth Fairy and Il Mostro were amongst the guests and staff and he needed to work out who before they killed again.

Will pulled the notes from his interviews, looking over those on Abel Gideon, and both Margot Verger and Alana Bloom. If the murderers were working together then alibis were

meaningless. The killers could have done their part and then only one of them displayed the body. They could also have alibied each other.

It also left the motive fairly open. If they were working together then it could be the exorcising of a grudge held by one or more of them, or there might be no reason at all why Verger was murdered. He may well have just been in the wrong place and the wrong time. The killers may simply have wanted someone to put their partnership into practice with.

Will puffed out a huff of frustration, resigning himself to leaving a really shitty review of the place, if it all did turn out to be so simple and badly plotted.

*

By lunchtime, no one had come to find him, but the view from his room had made it clear that no one had come or gone from the grounds, at least via the driveway.

The game had to still be on.

When his stomach growled, Will decided it was time he had to go back into the fray. Even so, he was hesitant in doing so and flinched when he heard the murmurs of activity coming from the dining room. For a split second he considered leaving.

He had been foolish to imagine that he could do something like this, be around people in this way, and not find it too much. It was certainly pushing his social abilities to the furthest possible degree. It didn't help that for many of them, he was able to get a sense for the person, not the character they were portraying. Which made everything feel disjointed and blurry.

But it was paid for, and he wanted to see it through. He needed to know, he realised. It wasn't just about getting the experience out of his system, he needed to know that he could solve this crime especially if it was such a simple story. He wanted to know he was capable.

For so many years, he had been told he was too unstable for police work, hadn't even been able to get a foot in the door with any job remotely connected to crime solving. But he knew, in his heart, he could do this. If they'd given him the chance he could have been the greatest criminal profiler the US had ever seen! He had to see it through now, push past all discomforts, to know that he was right about that.

So he sucked in a breath, set his jaw and continued on.

He was passing the reception, and the open door into Chilton's office, when voices caught his attention. Hushed and conspiratorial, he could hear Chilton speaking to someone with no little urgency.

"This one is smart."

Will recognised the soft twang of Dr Gideon's voice.

"Yes," A casual answer from Chilton, "I have always appreciated you my friend. You've always provided me with the singular opportunity to analyse a pure sociopath. He might be

smart, but I'll wager not smart enough to work you out. He'll never realise that you're the Chesapeake Ripper."

"Yes," Gideon agreed. "He'll find out with the others when I make my grand gesture. So they will always remember who I am!" The words were firm and passionate.

"Yes, yes," Chilton's words were placating and dismissive, "when I say so. You wait until I tell you that the time is right."

There was a murmur of agreement and then Will could hear papers shuffling and chairs scraping. He pulled himself from the spot and started towards the dining room.

Gideon was the Ripper? An odd casting, and he had to assume that they'd known he was there in order to set up that little scene.

Maybe that's why working out who was who had proven difficult so far? There was no way he'd have set Gideon as the Ripper. The real Ripper, out there in the real world, would have to have been a surgeon, would likely have had some traumatic past event. Would also have to evade suspicion by keeping a low profile or being charmingly above reproach. So whilst the doctor part was right, he couldn't imagine Gideon as low profile or charming. The man seemed like a creep and clearly was hasty about a chance to show himself off. Not a great actor if he was meant to be the Ripper.

At least it took him a step closer though. If Gideon was the Ripper, he wondered if Dolarhyde was a reasonable suspect for the Tooth Fairy? There was something deeply unsettling about him that did not seem like an act. So Will also had to consider the possibility that he was a red herring. Hired to seem like a killer when in fact he wasn't involved at all.

And Il Mostro…

Hannibal came immediately to mind.

And Will had to admit that this too might be a red herring, but one of his own making. Did he just want Hannibal to be one of the serial killers to try and justify his own thoughts and feelings? The thought of Will having found some sort of connection with a man playing a killer, made something inside him ache. A fundamental truth about himself that he didn't want to investigate. And that was meaningless all the same given that this was all a game, and none of these people were really murderers at all.

Will took a breath, clearing his mind, before he entered the dining room.

Perhaps given the uncertainty of the last twenty-four hours, and the fact that the whole of the grounds looked to be waterlogged, almost everyone was in the dining room. Mostly sat off in their appropriate groups. There was no room at any of the "FBI" tables, leaving only seats at two tables. Both set for two diners, one with Hannibal Lecter, and the other Shadow Moon.

Will looked between the two potential seats before starting into the dining room.

"May I sit with you?" Will asked, his hand on the back of the chair.

Shadow Moon looked up with a soft, knowing grin, and gave a nod, “Of course, I’d be glad of the company.”

Will returned the smile and pulled out the chair, taking the seat with his back to Lecter, but certain the man’s eyes were on him.

Not that it mattered. He wasn’t going to play that nonsense part of this game, and he intended to make that clear. He had come here to solve a murder, to prove something to himself, and he was damn well going to do that and not allow the ridiculous distractions.

“I hope you don’t mind?” Will asked, pulling out his notepad and indicated it.

Mr Moon frowned but shook his head all the same. “I guess not.”

“I just wanted to ask you a few questions about how you came to be here. I’m sure you understand, given everything that has happened.” Will continued, his tone brooking no argument as Mr Moon’s smile faded from potential lothario to potential suspect.

Moon nodded again, but before Will could ask anything, Chilton arrived at the table with a pot of coffee and turned over the cup in front of Will to pour it. “Bacon and eggs?” He suggested.

Will nodded, “Sure, that’ll do fine.”

He didn’t look up at Chilton and made sure his tone sounded like the dismissal it was.

When the man was a little further off again, topping up more coffee on the way to the kitchen, Will studied Shadow Moon.

“So what’s your story?” Will asked, cocking his head. “Or do they not give you a backstory? You just turn up when they figure the player is gay, right?”

Moon let out a little huff, “Look, I’m just doing my job. You’re giving too much credit to Fred if you expected this experience to be well written. Honestly, I’m surprised he didn’t just make it so the butler did it.” His accent slipped a little and he sounded a very different kind of cocksure than the day before.

“There isn’t a butler,” Will found himself grinning. He actually liked this guy. The way he immediately cut the bullshit and was himself was refreshing. It made him easier to be around because he didn’t seem like he was being two people at once. Just like Hannibal...

Moon smiled back, “Probably for the best then.”

Will let out a low chuckle, before making a note in his little book.

He didn’t miss the drag of a chair behind him and the slow steps passed them and out the dining room door. It was strange how, in so little time, he already recognised the gait and sound of Hannibal Lecter’s steps.

Moon’s eyes followed Lecter as he left the room, a frown there.

“Something wrong?” Will asked, making a concerted effort not to turn his head and look after the man.

Moon shook his head dismissively, but spoke all the same, “Never seen him like that. He’s usually very Mr In Control. Not cold, but… aloof. And reserved. I wouldn’t have thought the man had an emotional bone in his body, but he was certainly looking over here like he wanted to kill me.” Moon laughed. “Maybe I’ll be the next victim?”

Will smiled but couldn’t bring himself to laugh.

*

After lunch, Will went back out to the crime scene with some of the FBI, and as expected, there wasn’t much left of it. Someone had already been out and started to clear up, but the tents were ripped apart and the tableau was in bits. In fact, the body had just been put into a body bag and moved into the one tent that had been resurrected, though it flapped about a bit. Perhaps half standing was more accurate.

Will approached and followed the body bag in, seeing Bev there ready to receive it.

“I guess we won’t be doing any more in situ examinations,” She smiled breezily, like nothing would ever knock her enthusiasm. Will liked that. And perhaps it was something he also wanted a little of. In real life, Bev Katz would never have been his friend, she’d have thought him as much a freak as everyone else did. But here? If it were real? He could imagine a reality where they worked side by side and went for drinks after work, laughing together to try and separate themselves from the horrors of their work.

Will shook his head, “I’m not sure we’re going to get anything more of use. I mean… we don’t have anything of use. I read the report. No prints, no forensic evidence at all really. We have bits of MOs, and diddly squat beyond that.”

Bev was trying to hide her appreciative grin as she gave him a little nod, “Get you Graham. Going all serious on this one. I like it. So what's next?”

Will looked around the room and then saw that one of the white boards was on the floor. He went over and stood it back up in it’s frame, before wheeling it over to the mobile morgue slab the body bag had been set on. Bev fished a marker from her pocket and handed it to him.

When Jack walked in, Will was already deep into writing on the board. He’d split most of the board into three, each with the name of the three suspected killers at the top and then photos of the crime scene stuck to the side.

At the bottom of the board, Will had written out the names of all the suspects up at the house.

“What’s this?” Jack asked as he wandered in, a cup of coffee in hand.

“Police work,” Bev quipped.

“I’m just trying to put it all out. Who is who in these.” Will pointed at the murder scene photos and continued to write out lists. Noting under each of the murderer headings, which

aspect of the kill and presentation of the tableau suited the MO of each.

“But more importantly, who is who…” Will pointed at the names at the bottom of the board. “Forget everyone’s alibis, if they are working together, alibis mean nothing.”

Jack cocked a brow but then nodded, conceding the point easily.

“Dolarhyde,” Will started, “Is… unbalanced. Going on a gut feeling… which seems to be one of the few options we have here, I think he could be the Tooth Fairy.” Part of him hesitated to say it, but Shadow’s comment about Chilton’s simple plotting made him think that throwing any red herrings in was beyond the man’s capabilities. This was meant to be simple to solve, otherwise people wouldn’t enjoy the experience, he had to also keep in mind.

Bev and Jack waited for an explanation and Will wasn’t sure he could give one that made sense. The fact was, all three murderers had to be the people there, and so there was an element of deduction. But there was more, an intuitive leap that might not stand scrutiny if they were in the real world and not all trapped there.

“The grandmother,” Jack commented thoughtfully, and Will latched onto it.

“Yes. Tooth Fairy’s MO has always suggested a dysfunctional family relationship, perhaps abuse. His concern over getting home to his grandmother is almost pathological.” Will continued and then drew a line between Tooth Fairy and Dolarhyde.

“There are aspects of his MO in the kill, the mirrored eyes, but no discernable motive. This isn’t his usual kill. In fact, despite not being well liked, I can’t find any solid motive anyone would kill Mason Verger. Which makes it more likely that it was the Ripper. We know the Chesapeake Ripper has no discernable victim type, but he does have a distinctive…”

Will trailed off before he could say style, as he’d intended. His mind suddenly full of Italian shoes and sharp suits. Of Hannibal Lecter. Will shuddered.

“Tableau,” Bev finished.

“Yeah.” Will nodded then cleared his throat. “A design.”

“Okay, this is some good work, but we need to be moving quicker on this. What more do you want from me, Will?” Jack’s tone was determined. “Technically we’re not holding anyone, they are here of their own volition and I don’t have enough to keep anyone from leaving once the access is cleared.”

Will’s head spun for a moment, realising Jack meant from the fake storm and not the real one, though they now might as well be one and the same.

“I want to search the rooms Jack. The whole grounds, but we need to start with the rooms, and any cars if they brought them. The Ripper takes trophies, that is something consistent, something unlikely to change even with an escalating MO or working with another killer. He’ll want his trophies. Whether they agree to it or not, we’ve already wasted time in not searching the guest’s rooms. ”

Jack considered him for a moment then gave a curt nod, despite the obvious criticism there. “We don’t have a warrant but… Okay, Will. Better ask for forgiveness than permission, I’ll make sure it’s straightened out. Go back to the-”

Jack’s words were cut off by a faint scream.

Faint to them, but actually clearly, a ringingly loud scream that echoed up from the house.

“What the-” Bev started and they were all out of the tent in a moment. Others still milling around sorting part of the crime scene had stopped too.

“We’ll head back,” Jack said, and Will was sure he was a little shaken. Whatever this was, either Jack was a better actor than he’d given him credit for, or he’d had no idea it was coming. A twist? Or something actually real?

They were heading back at a jog when Chilton pulled before them in a golf buggy. He looked pale and stricken and Jack hesitated at the sight of him.

“Get in,” Chilton told them, “There’s been a murder.”

Will noted how his voice trembled. And how he said murder. Not *another murder.*

*

When they arrived back from the golf course, the commotion around the stables was clear.

The couple of FBI staff stood around, unsure what to do given that they were merely actors. The only person that seemed to be moving with any purpose was Hannibal Lecter. He left them and headed towards the stable doors, very much someone who knew what they were doing, it would seem.

“What do we do Jack? What do we do?” Chilton was mumbling the words as he pulled up. He left the engine running as they all jumped out and rushed towards the stables.

“I… I thought it was a fake. Like, another one. I figured Frederick was shaking things up a bit. But then…” One of the FBI people started, looking pale and visibly shaking.

Will was pretty sure the guy was going to throw up, and he couldn't stop himself from pointing in the direction of the main house, "Alright, now go to a break. Don't contaminate the crime scene."

If anyone thought that it was inappropriate for Will to still be *in character*, no one said anything. In fact, they all seemed too concerned about what was going on to care, quite rightly.

Will looked back over to the stable to see Hannibal coming back and walking towards them, shaking his head at Chilton, which drew a stuttering gasp from the man.

When he reached them, Dolarhyde and Gideon, one agitated and the other disturbingly calm, had joined them.

"It's Mason Verger," Hannibal told them. "He's been dead some time, since before the storm. He's… been displayed."

"Verger?" Will asked, confused. "But he's…"

Hannibal nodded, whilst Chilton waved his hand dismissively and said, "Yes, yes. The victim… In the game."

"He's a real person?"

"Was," Gideon corrected, coldly. It sent a chill through Will.

He looked at Hannibal who seemed to be the only one that wasn't being super creepy, losing it or a bit of both.

"He is, was real. An employee here. The murdered body is modelled on him, he would have become relevant to the… story…" Hannibal finished. "Perhaps Doctor Gideon and myself, as professionals, should secure the scene and-"

"Professionals?" Will frowned. Professional actors?

"Abel and I are both medical doctors. I have worked with the FBI on several occasions. I think it best that someone take over in a professional capacity until law enforcement arrives."

Will blinked. He had a sudden feeling of not knowing what was real and what wasn't. "You're a doctor?"

"Yes, Will." Hannibal replied slowly, as though trying to account for Will being in shock.

"I want to see the body," he swallowed and felt his skin go hot as he blurted the words.

"Jesus christ," Jack threw up his hands, "I knew this place would draw nothing but freaks."

"I need… Is this still part of the game?" He looked at Hannibal before turning on all of them. "I need to know if it's real. A real murder." Will managed, trying not to acknowledge that there was definitely more than that.

But it was Hannibal that lay his hand on Will's shoulder and said gently, "No, Will. This is real. It's unfortunate that you have been caught up in this ugly business. Much like his character, Mason was not a well liked man."

As if on cue, Margot and Alana came around the corner of the house, heading towards them with worried expressions. Having clearly heard something, though perhaps not all, of the tragedy.

"That doesn't mean he deserved to be murdered," Jack chimed in, a slightly hysterical voice of reason. "We need to call someone Frederick!" Jack all but bellowed. "Why haven't you called someone?"

“I…” Chilton started but then shook his head, put up his hands. Uncertain and out of his depth.

“Let’s… not be too hasty,” They all turned to see Abel Gideon stood surveying the scene. “Hannibal? Francis?”

Both men looked at Gideon. Dolarhyde nodded immediately, a wild fear in his eyes. Lecter considered a little longer, looking around. His eyes fell upon Margot, Alana and then Will, taking them in thoughtfully. And lastly Chilton, with no little disdain.

“Yes, Abel. I agree.”

"What is it?" Alana asked quickly, fearfully, as the ladies joined them.

Chilton turned to them, as though suddenly regaining a modicum of professional capability, he rested a hand on Margot's arm. Her flinch at his touch was barely there, but Will saw it and didn’t blame her.

"I'm so sorry, Margot."

"What?" Margot asked, confused and worried. "What's happened?"

"Your brother has been murdered," Gideon said bluntly, eyeing her.

She blinked and then gave a hysterical laugh, "You're joking? Is this…" She looked around them, distraught, Alana seemed equally so, but also tempered. There was something in their reactions, something ever so slight, that told Will they already knew. Maybe this *was* all part of the game?

But the tears, those were real too, streaming silently down Margot's face. She let out a breath that almost seemed like relief.

Will again was struck by the need to understand what the fuck was going on, he felt like he was in free fall, or drifting to sea without a paddle.

And then Hannibal's hand was on his arm, "Are you alright, Will?" He asked quietly.

Will nodded mutely, for the want of anything else to do.

"Why aren't we calling the police?" He finally said quietly, looking around the circle of faces.

He felt like he was seeing them all for the first time. He had been so caught up in the game as to be blinded to reality and suddenly it all shifted and fit together. It wasn't that the game was still on, it was that half of it was already reality.

Lecter and Gideon really were doctors, they were who they pretended to be. Dolarhyde was unhinged, Alana and Margot were lovers. Chilton… well he still seemed a bit like a used car salesman, but there was clearly more beneath the surface.

"It's best this is dealt with… internally," Gideon said with a cold smile, before anyone else had a chance to speak.

Will looked at them all, Jack looked as appalled as he felt, but was saying nothing. Doing nothing. No one was, everyone was happy to let this continue.

Will shook his head, "You're all fucking insane!"

He turned to stomp back up to the house, and there was a pause behind him, as though a decision was being made.

*

Will was practically running by the time he reached the door, he unholstered his gun as he moved. Was it real? He had no idea, but perhaps it might offer some protection if they tried to stop him leaving. Because he was fucking leaving, he was going to go the fuck home.

First, Will decided, he was going to grab all the information he had in his room and go to the nearest police station and try to explain the whole insane thing. Report the murder, report the fact that everyone here was clearly nuts and wanted to cover it up.

He raced up the stairs and heard steps coming along the hallway as he reached the top. He levelled his gun.

"Freeze," He barked the order and Shadow Moon came to a complete stop, eyes wide as he slowly raised his hands.

"Hey, I'm not a suspect. I wasn't even here," Shadow spoke with that cool charm. Still playing the game, it was clear he had no fucking idea what was going on.

Will slowly lowered the gun, still gripping it in two hands as he pointed it at the floor between them.

"Fuck, Will is everything okay?" Shadow read his expression. He looked around for a moment as if to see if anyone bore witness, and then took a step forward, holding out a hand. His accent changed from the suave American charm, to a roguish London accent.

"Look, I know this game can be a mind fuck. There's a lot to take in when it's immersive like this. That's why the love interest thing is important. It can help, gives you some respite, y'know?" Shadow grinned at him and took another step forward. "And seriously, I don't mind. You're the cutest one we've had in awhile. We can go as far as you like."

Will stopped himself reflexively raising the gun again, shaking.

"You need to relax, want me to help you with that?" Shadow licked his lips. "Seriously, Will. It's why I'm here." There was concern in his expression, and in that moment, Will was sure he might have met the only normal person in this place. Even if he apparently was a callboy.

Even so, Will shook his head, exasperated and so utterly fucking done with this place. He didn't need to be wooed or fucked. He needed to get out of this crazy fucking place.

"Someone has been murdered, the game is over. This place is over." Will told him, holstering his gun.

Shadow blinked at him, "That's the whole point."

"A real murder. Mason Verger. For real."

Shadow stared at him then, completely lacking in surprise, in fact after a moment his face twisted into something of a cruel smile. Or as cruel as it got on his handsome face.

"Good." He spat the word, before asking, "Is Margot okay? What did he do to her this time?"

"What?" Will asked, now beyond bewildered.

Then there were footfalls on the steps behind him.

"Will!" Hannibal called to him.

And there he stood on the landing, caught between Hannibal Lecter and Shadow Moon.

*

Will had run, pushing past Hannibal and back out the building and into the fresh air. He needed to escape.

“I'm just about worn out with you crazy sons of bitches,” Will muttered under his breath as he rounded the corner back to the stables. He hadn’t consciously gone there but his feet had taken him all the same. He’d meant to find a car and just get the fuck out of there. But here he was, at the stables again.

He didn’t stop running until he was at the back of the stables, only just able to hear the activity around the front over his panted breaths.

Will put his hands on his knees, catching his breath and resisting sinking to the floor. This was all too much and he felt trapped. It felt like he was never going to get out of this game.

As he caught his breath, he listened to the movement within. Everyone was leaving, and no police were being called. They were just going to leave the body and deal with it their own way. Whatever the fuck that was. This couldn’t be right. It had to still be part of the game. Something he had to figure out.

Will listened at the back door, and when everything sounded completely still, he eased it open.

A few of the lamps hanging up next to the horse pens gave enough illumination to see.

Will’s breath caught in his throat.

This was real. So damn real there was no denying it.

Mason Verger, the real one, had been displayed with no little artistry. Not as much time or effort as with the fake murder, but obviously in this case the killer had had to work quickly.

His throat had been slit, and the blood had run down him, staining his entire body pink. He had been suspended on fishing wire, hooks through his back and shoulders. Stripped naked, his genitalia had been removed and placed in his own mouth. The wound at his crotch had been stuffed with straw. More straw poked from his eyes and ears, and from his mouth around the flesh stuffed in there. It almost gave him the appearance of a scarecrow.

A straw man, lacking in substance and integrity.

Will trembled. It was obscene. And yet there was a beauty to it. He could feel the vengeance coming from it. Someone had killed Verger for revenge, they had been righteous. It made Will draw breath at his inability to find it ugly or condemn it.

All but the slit throat reminded him of other things he had seen, crime scenes he had studied for years. The ones where there hadn't been as much time. When the Chesapeake Ripper had created with less planning. Ad hoc kills perhaps, or maybe ones that hadn't gone quite as planned. Not quite as the fake murder, where Verger had been made up so beautifully.

Though this was a beauty in itself.

Will's heart began to race.

"Have you seen enough, Will?" Hannibal's cool words didn't startle him, but washed over him. The man had finally caught back up with him and Will wasn't sure he had a problem with that.

"This was the Chesapeake Ripper," Will breathed out the words and tried not to tremble. Not fear, but at the thought of a real killer actually having been there. Of at least one of them being a real serial killer. He found a strange hope in his heart that he knew he shouldn't.

"Hmm," Hannibal hummed thoughtfully.

"Where's Shadow?" Will asked, not turning.

"He went back to his room. I think he's probably the sanest of us all. Though if he tries to leave, Frederick will stop him." Hannibal explained.

"And I'm trapped here too then," Will acknowledged.

"Perhaps." Hannibal allowed. "Had the storm not arrived, maybe the game would have ended, you would have solved your crime and be on your way home, none the wiser. If you are stuck here, you should solve it anyway."

He was sure he could hear a slight tremble in Hannibal's words.

Will shook his head, "The fake murder is obvious. It was from the start. Killers working together, I just never got the motive. Which isn't important now."

Will was surprised when Hannibal let out a dark chuckle at that.

“No, I suppose not. And, I can assure you, the ending there would not have been satisfactory for you. Frederick has a very poor talent for plotting and writing. It has been enough to satisfy many, but you aren’t like the people who have come before Will. You can really see what’s going on here. You would have been able to even if this hadn’t happened.”

“So what was the ending?” Will asked, needing to finally know if he could have solved it.

Hannibal chuckled again, then let out a long sigh. “Very simple. Verger was in the wrong place at the wrong time whilst three killers looked for someone to test a new partnership on. Pointless and unrealistic.” Hannibal assessed. “Unlike this.”

He saw Hannibal’s hand out of the corner of his eye, indicating Verger’s corpse.

“He hurt someone. This was revenge.” Will said and then there was silence for a moment.

“What now for you, Will? Will you try to get out and call the authorities? Will you leave quietly once this has all been taken care of and return to your old life to keep this secret?” Hannibal asked.

“Are those my only two options?” The words came out fast, and full of longing that he hadn’t intended.

“Will, I…” Hannibal stepped forward and was immediately behind him then. He hesitated before slipping his arms around Will and hold him to his chest.

Will let out a shuddering breath.

“I don’t even know what is reality and what is fiction any more.” Will lamented, with a sigh that ended in a chuckle.

“You do, Will. If you search inside yourself, I know you know the truth of all of this. I know you can see me.”

“Hannibal” Will started cautiously, he turned in Hannibal’s arms and looked up at him. Letting his empathy reach out to really see the man as they both wanted to be seen. “Did you kill the real Mason Verger?”

Will was shaking, waiting for the answer. Knowing it meant everything. If he did then Hannibal was the Chesapeake Ripper, and Will would know then and there that he could fall in love with a monster.

That he wanted to. That he was already doing so. And it would make sense and be right. It would make everything in his life make complete sense, because he knew he was a monster too.

Hannibal let out a sigh, pulling Will to him and lowering his mouth to Will’s ear.

“I didn’t, Will. I didn’t kill him.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Who killed Mason Verger? Twice?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was getting dark outside.

Will had shrugged from Hannibal's grasp and started back from the stables. He could hear the clock in the hallway chiming as he reached the house, and the noise further in. It sounded like everyone was crowded into the bar and lounge, just as they had during the storm. Perhaps Chilton had even called them all there to discuss what would, or more specifically wouldn't happen next.

And Will was done. So damn done with it all. He knew what had happened, he knew Hannibal was telling the truth, and he knew what he could see. What he could feel. He knew how all that fit together.

The conversation he'd overheard between Chilton and Gideon came back to mind and now in a new light. There had been a real murder, people here were really murderers, and Gideon claimed to be the Chesapeake Ripper. There had to be something to that, it couldn't be a coincidence.

Will strode into Chilton's empty office and started rifling through filing cabinets and papers, trying to find something. Anything that made this make sense. That added up to what he was sure he already knew.

"Will? What's going on?" Jack Crawford stood in the doorway to the office. He looked a mess. Clearly he'd already had a couple of drinks, his tie gone and shirt loosened. He looked like another man trapped here and Will found himself thinking of the poor ones amongst them that really were just actors and caught up in this.

"Chilton is lying to us," Will explained, "He knew there were really killers here all along, this is all a front. He-"

Will stopped, his hands grasping at the papers they held. They'd come from the bottom of the filing cabinet. "This is…"

He looked through the papers and then handed them to Jack, who looked down at that with an ever increasing frown.

“What the… Austenian Institute for the Criminally Insane. Closed, due to mismanagement. All patients relocated.” Jack shuffled through them. “Chilton used to run an insane asylum?”

Will picked through more of the old yellowing pages, finding the answer to his own questions. “And Gideon was his patient.”

Will handed over the thick file he’d found. Patient notes. Gideon had killed his family, claimed later to be the Chesapeake Ripper, but that was never made public. Will would have known about that if it had been. There were other reports inserted, accounts from other specialists refuting the claim, and accusing Chilton of psychic driving - of brainwashing Gideon to believe it.

“What the fuck, this is… I understand it all now.” Will shook his head.

“It’s fucking nuts. This whole thing is nuts. I’ve been saying that for years. And now here’s the proof.” Jack growled.

“Can I help you gentlemen?”

They turned to see Chilton in the doorway, a cocked brow and looking every bit the smarmy salesman. Will couldn’t for one moment imagine him as any kind of therapist, let alone head of a mental institute.

“You can explain this,” Jack threw the papers at him and they scattered at his feet.

Chilton didn’t look phased, “This is a private area.”

Jack let out a booming laugh, “You gonna call the cops then? Huh? Call the cops on us, I dare you.”

Will could see Jack was getting heated. He’d worked here for years and clearly hadn’t been entirely comfortable, but hadn’t known what was off just that something was. Only, it transpired, that something was murder. In the last few days this place had shown it’s true colours. And it was time to expose it all.

Will picked up the papers he’d already put to the side, the manuscript he’d found first before digging through the files. He rolled it and shoved it into his back pocket.

“I think,” Hannibal’s cool tone came from behind Chilton, “We should move this to the lounge, Chilton. It’s time we had this all out in the open.”

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The few FBI types were sat the bar, helping themselves to the booze behind it and occasionally sending a glance Jack’s way in the hopes that he would be in a position to sort all this out.

Alana and Margot stood next to the low burning fire, drinks in hand. Dolarhyde by the window, looking out into the darkness. Bev, Jimmy and Zeller had gathered on the couch

next to the bar, talking quietly amongst themselves. And Shadow Moon sat playing chess with Gideon.

It was a hell of a fucking scene.

“Listen up everyone, we need to get this shit sorted.” Jack growled the words, glancing around, before grabbing Chilton and throwing him into an empty chair next to the wall. Jack remained standing next to Will and Hannibal, next to the door Hannibal had just closed gently behind them.

The whole room looked at Chilton, and then expectantly up at the three of them.

Jack looked to Will.

Will took a breath.

“Earlier today the body of Mason Verger, the real Mason Verger, was found in the stables. It has been there since before the storm.”

There was a murmuring from a few people, notably the FBI extras who were likely wondering why the hell the cops hadn’t been called.

“Don’t worry,” Will said, holding up his hands, “we’re going to call the police.”

“You can’t do that.” Came Gideon’s clipped response, not looking up from his chess game.

“There’s no other choice, Abel.” Hannibal responded.

The two shared a dark look before Gideon spat, “And who’s fault is that?”

The entire room looked back to Hannibal, who merely quirked his lips into a slight smile.

“What the hell is going on?” One of the FBI guys asked, looking despairingly at Will. “Are we still playing the game?”

Will shook his head, “No, not anymore.”

“We need to call the police.” Jack said again, forceful.

“I agree,” Shadow Moon spoke up, looking up coldly at all of them, his London accent now. “But I want to know, who killed Verger?”

There was something in his tone that made Will think it was to shake the killer’s hand rather than anything else. He looked at Will expectantly.

Will took a breath, “There’s more here than Verger’s murder. A bigger picture to unravel that it is clear Frederick Chilton could not have orchestrated alone, or at least by his own intent.”

Chilton let out a snort of derision and Jack glared down at him.

“It all started with you, Doctor Abel Gideon.” Will said, walking a little further into the room before turning to Gideon, who just smirked at him.

“Is that so?”

“Yes. When you were under the care of *Doctor* Chilton in the Austenian Institute for the Criminally Insane. He mismanaged the place into closure and thought he could channel his expertise into running this murder mystery themepark.” Will glanced at Chilton who was scowling now.

“When the Institute was closed down, he appears to have botched the paperwork in a way to suit him. In a way to release you into his care and bring you here. You probably thought that it was to use your expertise as a criminal, as a murderer. To help him plan out the events and stories.”

Will wasn’t deaf to the mutterings around the room, the shifting chairs at the claim that Gideon was a murderer. And that was the tip of the iceberg.

“But in truth, there was more to it than that. Wasn’t there, Doctor Chilton?” Will spat the words and turned to the sleazy little man. “Tell us, did you keep Gideon with you to keep your secret? That worse than just mismanagement, you had treated the patients unethically. Gideon especially? Used controversial treatments to make him think he was the Chesapeake Ripper. Or,” Will took a step closer to Chilton, “Did you actually believe your own lies?”

Will turned back to Gideon and pulled the papers from his back pocket, unrolling them and dropping them on the chess board.

“No!” Chilton cried out and stood, but Crawford knocked him back into the chair.

“What… is this? Frederick?” Gideon asked slowly as he picked up the pages. A manuscript for a tell all book about the Chesapeake Ripper, from the point of view of first his doctor and later his captive - Frederick Chilton. It was just the first few pages, but Will was sure there was more. Setting Chilton out as the tragic hero who tried to help the man he later became the victim of, going so far as to claim that Gideon kept him drugged and convinced that he wasn’t even himself.

“I can explain,” Chilton started.

“Stop talking!” Jack ordered, glowering down at him.

Chilton shook his head and continued, “That’s years old, I was going to… but then I realised that… I needed to keep this place running. It became bigger than just us…”

Gideon remained seething in his chair as Will nodded.

“Yes, because then you drew a monster, didn’t you?” Will said, turning then to Hannibal.

“Doctor Lecter. Again, you really are a doctor, aren’t you? That’s how knew about what had happened at the Austenian Institute, and Chilton’s work with the supposed Chesapeake Ripper. But, being the Ripper yourself, you decided to come and investigate. What you found

was this strange little world the pair had created, where you could live anonymously as you wished. As the Ripper, when it suited you. You took the moniker Il Mostro, the name you went by when murdering in Europe, and Chilton took you into his employ. You were biding your time, studying them, whilst deciding when to make your move. Chilton realising too late what he'd gotten himself into."

Chilton clenched his jaw and answered reluctantly, "I suspected there were… problems. I didn't know the scope of it until Francis arrived."

The room turned to look at Francis Dolarhyde's back.

"He trapped us here," Dolarhyde spoke up from by the window, not looking at them. "I just came looking for the Ripper. For years I had been looking for him, I'm an avid fan. And…"

Dolarhyde trailed off and shook his head.

Hannibal moved then, walking through the still room to Dolarhyde, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"It's alright, Francis."

Dolarhyde shuddered but didn't pull from Hannibal's touch.

Ridiculously, Will felt a blaze of jealousy roll through him.

"We could leave, but we then all knew too much about the other. If we left, would the others come after us? Scared that we might give them up to the authorities? And Francis… He needs someone to keep him in check, needs the sort of care he'd have gotten from an Institute." Hannibal spoke gently but his eyes shone with anger at Chilton.

"The Tooth Fairy," Will affirmed, nodding his head.

Dolarhyde turned with a snarl, almost screaming the words at Will, "The Great Red Dragon."

Several people visibly recoiled, and already many were all looking terrified and wet around the eyes. It grounded Will for a moment as to how crazy and scary this would be to a normal person. To someone that was not a murder or a… whatever he was.

Hannibal squeezed Dolarhyde's shoulder, "Of course, Francis. Will wasn't aware."

It took a few moments for Dolarhyde to calm, but Will understood all the more now why they all stayed. They were as strong as their weakest link and now they had to keep each other's secrets.

"And that's why you all went along with this? You got to know each other and then couldn't trust one another if one of you left?" Jack asked, frowning deeply and rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Then you hired me, us," he gestured around at the rest of the actual actors. "And now we're all trapped here too!"

Will nodded his head, knowing the Jack was right of course, if they wanted to keep this covered up, then they'd all have to stay. One way or another. But this had to end.

"No, that's why we're calling the authorities. And we'll all give the same story. Once they have a confession they won't dig too deeply."

"So who killed Verger? Who is going to confess?" Jack asked.

"Those questions have two different answers," Will replied quietly.

"Oh, I see how it is, why you weren't interested in Alana or Shadow," Chilton spat the words, "You'd already fallen for Lecter. He murdered Verger and you're going to force someone else to confess in his place instead. How fucking romantic."

"No, he didn't kill Verger." Will snapped back, before levelling his voice again, "I asked him and I believe him. But one thing I didn't ask him." Will turned to Hannibal. "Doctor, did you pose the body? Did you create the tableau."

Hannibal's mouth twitched into a smile that made Will's heart thunder. He knew he was the Ripper, that he had to be, and this was confirmation.

He took a breath before continuing, "So then, there was only one person who could have murdered Mason Verger." He turned to the fireplace. "Alana Bloom."

There were gasps of shock around the room, and all eyes turned to Alana and Margot.

Alana let out a shaky breath and knocked back the rest of her drink. Silent tears started to roll down Margot's face.

"The problem is Chilton, when you start trapping people here, making it so they can't leave. You trap them in their circumstances." He barked the words then turned to the ladies and asked gently, "How did he end up here Margot?"

She wiped back the tears. "I'd gotten away from him. It took years to…" She shook her head. "We found this place, we were willing to do whatever we had to, to stay here. To stay hidden. But he found us. Tracked us down. He managed to get a job before we even knew he'd found us. Then here was here, in our faces all the time and…" She trailed off and rubbed at her arm, where she had flinched when Chilton had touched her earlier.

Will picked it up from there, "Then he found out what was going on, smart guy I heard. Worked out what Chilton was all about and then Chilton had to keep him here no matter what he did. Who he hurt."

Margot nodded, her tears falling again. Not tears for Mason though, she took Alana's hand and gripped it tightly.

"I discovered Alana just moments after she had killed him." Hannibal jumped in, clearly trying to save the women any more distress. "I'm grateful I was the one to find her. She had confronted him after he had attacked Margot, tried to sexually assault his sister. Things had become heated, and she grabbed one of the utility knives kept in the stables. They struggled,

she slit his throat. I found her, got her cleaned up. And…" He looked at Will. "The storm was on the horizon. I went back to pose the body. I had hoped that we could convince our friends here, that it was all fake."

"But by the time we arrived, by the time you arrived. People had already realised it was real."

Hannibal nodded.

"And now we're all fucking stuck?" Zeller chimed in.

"No, I've already said. We're calling the police." Will replied and Margot began to sob. "But, as I also said. Who killed Mason and who will confess are not the same answer. Not the same person."

Will strolled over to Chilton.

"You've made a mess here doctor, and it's time to clear it up. Time for you to take responsibility."

The room was silent with expectation as Will and Chilton stared at each other.

"Are you joking?" Chilton finally asked with a sneer.

"Not at all," Hannibal chimed in and stepped forward. "A taste of his own medicine, Will?"

Will nodded, "That's what I was thinking. Is it something you can do?"

Hannibal gave a curt nod, "Yes. Psychic driving usually takes some time. But I believe there are some techniques, some medications I can use to hasten the process. And, at the least make Chilton so raving that any word to the contrary will be his against ours."

"All of ours," Will commented to the room, looking around each of them.

"Don't do this." Chilton went to get out of his chair again and Jack slammed him back so hard his head hit the wall. Not enough to knock him out but enough to make him drowsy.

"What's your plan, Will?" Jack asked.

"Here's how I see it," Will started, looking at Jack and then the rest of them. "There has been one death here. In self defence, and with provocation. Shadow Moon's response made it clear to me, that it was only a matter of time before someone killed Mason Verger. But cops aren't going to see this as self defence, not now. Because the plan had been to cover it up. To keep this little haven of serial killers safe. And it is safe, for them, for us, for the public at large. Whilst they are in here they aren't killing."

There were nods around the room giving away different levels of understanding.

"What I'm saying is that Hannibal uses on Chilton the same technique he used to fuck with Gideon. Get Chilton to confess to the murder. He finally gets to be the star of the story. All this, the years of running this place after what had happened before, the loss of his career.

He’s been going slowly insane. Killed Mason thinking it was part of the game. I’m afraid the only safe place for him would be an Institution.”

Will looked at Chilton who was shaking his head but not quite with it enough to protest further than that.

“We’ll find the body tomorrow. We’ll call the police. We’ll all report the same, Chilton is mad, was raving about murdering him. That he should have already been dead at the crime scene. And then once Chilton is gone. We’re all free. As long as we all stick to that story.” Will looked around them all and they gave nods of ascent.

“And if *they* don’t?” Gideon asked pointedly.

“I will pay them a visit.” Hannibal spoke coolly. He gave Will a look, which conveyed everything Will hadn’t said. That Francis couldn’t leave, that someone had to stay with him. That realistically Gideon wasn’t the person able to do that. In the end they would all be free, except the ones who had accidentally trapped themselves.

There was silence for a very long moment, finally broken by Jack clapping his hands together once.

“That all sounds great. Doctor Lecter, would you like me to help you take Chilton to a private room? Because I for one can’t wait to get the fuck out of here!”

One Week Later

Will had left before the morning. Whilst the building rang with Chilton’s screams and protestations.

Shadow Moon had driven him to the airport before taking off himself, and he had no doubt that other than Hannibal, Gideon and Dolarhyde, that the others would be close behind them as soon as the police had released the scene.

He knew he should have stayed, but he just couldn’t think about it any further. He didn’t want to think about Hannibal Lecter and the way his perfect hands had created art from the dead. How he wanted to watch the man implant the madness within Chilton. How he wanted to watch him kill. Wanted to join him.

It had all been too fucking much and Will just wanted to get back to normal life. After all that, he wanted to leave it all behind. He needed to be normal. Now confronted with proof of what he was, what he could be, the prospect overwhelmed him to the point of terror.

But a week after leaving Murderland, life hadn't quite got back to normal and Will wasn't sure if it ever would. What was normal now? Maybe there never could be normal now?

He'd been exposed to something there, something more than the experience had promised. And not the murder and all the crazy shit that came with it. But a glimpse of his true self. The one he'd been successfully ignoring for years. The one he had buried under an interest, a hobby. Never acknowledging that it was in fact a desire until now.

Deep down he knew what he was, even if he'd never acted on it. He knew he wanted to and had been so unsure of what that made him. He had spent years studying, reading books and indulging his interest and never encountered anyone that thought exactly the same as him, that didn't fit those specific profiles.

That was something *other*.

An intelligent psychopath.

And then there was Hannibal Lecter.

Will remembered his instant connection, the one he thought the doctor had forced as part of the experience. But now he knew that what he had felt had been real, and it was too late. He'd run away. And not because of the horror of it all, but because it was all too much for him to admit to in that moment.

His desire for Hannibal, his desire to be part of what he did. To hunt with him.

How was he ever going to return to real life?

Instead he just went through the motions. If anything he was even more withdrawn at his job and some days felt like calling in, but he couldn't afford to lose the money. This wasn't the life he wanted. He'd had a taste of something at Murderland and now he had nothing.

By the end of the week he realised life would never be the same and it seemed so beyond his power to do anything about that.

On Saturday, mid morning, an hour before he needed to leave for work, there was a knock at his door.

Will rarely had visitors, and those that came over usually called first. He was very much not in the mood to answer the door to salesmen or proselytisers, so he called out from the small living room, "No thank you."

"Will?"

Will's heart stopped at the sound of the familiar voice on the other side of the door.

He had to stop himself rushing to the door to fling it open, tempered by the part of him that didn't want to open that part of his life back up again. In theory he knew he should move on, be better, get better - if such a thing were possible. And continuing to daydream about that life, about having that for real, was only going to make things harder in the long run. He would never have the life Murderland had taunted him with.

FBI Agent by day, vengeful serial killer by night.

Will trembled and Hannibal knocked again.

"Please, Will. Let me talk with you."

Will bit at his lower lip, thinking it over even as he walked slowly to the door. When he opened it, Hannibal stood there looking contrite. Also looking every bit as stuffy and eccentric as he had at Murderland, which was so extraordinarily out of place. Like Will himself.

"Why are you here?" Will asked, a plaintive tone in his voice.

"I had to see you." Hannibal said, ardently. He stepped forward and for a moment seemed as though he would raise his hand to Will's cheek but must have thought better of it. "You left before I could explain everything."

"I knew all I needed to," Will replied. Not saying more, not saying that if he'd stayed longer, he wouldn't have wanted to leave.

"Chilton's gone, as planned." Hannibal said, flatly. "Jack too, he quit. All the actors of course were gone in the blink of an eye. A few of us remain, it's… better that way."

"They let you leave?" Will asked, thinking of Gideon and Dolarhyde.

"For a short time. I told them what I planned, and they know I'll be back with them very shortly. I just need to explain." Hannibal spoke softly.

Will's quirked brow betrayed his curiosity but he shook his head. "I don't care. I can't… I need to forget about it all." He walked back into the room, leaving the door open.

Hannibal promptly walked through it and closed the door quietly behind him.

"Not because it was traumatic for you," Hannibal observed, "Quite the opposite. Am I right?"

Will looked at him with a scowl, a raised brow, an expression that was an attempt at sceptical, but in fact gave him away completely. He could tell from Hannibal's smile.

Hannibal closed the door behind them.

"What are you?" Will asked.

"You know, Will. You've known since the moment we met. You could see me very clearly even then."

Will trembled at the truth in it. This man was a predator.

"What does that make me?" Will asked, a little terrified to know the answer.

"Perfect. Beautiful. It makes you exactly who you should be."

Hannibal took the morning paper from inside his jacket and handed it to Will, the front page displayed a grainy and partially censored photo of a murder scene. What he could see made clear this was Hannibal's work. The body was in a cage and entwined with a bramble bush. Will frowned and started to read the column beneath it, the body had been identified as-

“My boss?” Will asked, looking up at Hannibal.

“When I attempted to track you down he crossed my path, and had some very disparaging things to say that were both untrue and homophobic. So I took the liberty. Consider it a… love note.”

Hannibal seemed less certain of the words as he spoke, the confidence in his tone fading.

Will took a deep breath.

“You killed him for me? Displayed his body to try and… woo me?” Will asked, swallowing hard. Was that what this was? There was a flicker of something in Will, something almost like hope, at the thought of what this meant. Of a life he might be able to have part of, and that part might be Hannibal.

“This photo of course doesn’t do it justice. I can take you to see it, if you like?” Hannibal asked, biting on his lower lip in the only nervous gesture Will had seen in him.

“See it…” Will mused over the words. “I… Next time, I want to see it when you’re doing it. I want to… I want to help you do it. Does that make me weird?”

Hannibal chuckled and took hold of Will’s shirt, pulling them to each other and taking Will in his arms, “It’s fine to be weird.”

*

They kissed, desperately. Now that they could, now that Will was no longer pulling back.

Because he knew now that the connection he’d felt between them was real. That they could see each other for who they were, and that Hannibal wanted him as much in return for exactly those reasons too. He knew he could accept himself for who and what he was.

It was so much, it made his head swim. He’d had to pull back from the kiss to catch his breath. Though that had been short lived.

Hannibal had then picked him up and strode into the bedroom, dropping him down onto the narrow bed before climbing over him.

“I want to be inside you,” Hannibal growled at him.

Will let out a shocked little noise that was almost a squeal. “I think I want that too, but I’ve never… I’ve not, um, gone that far before.”

Hannibal had rested his forehead against Will’s and closed his eyes, “You’re so perfect.” He tried to catch his breath, clearly having to hold himself back.

Part of Will knew he should be scared, he knew what this man was capable of. This predator. How powerful he was. But also knew that Hannibal would never hurt him.

“I could-” Will started but was cut off with a shake of Hannibal’s head.

“No, not here. Not like this… That can wait. I just want you to… I want to make you come. I want to give you pleasure.”

Will groaned and spread his legs, allowing Hannibal to slot between them as he wrapped his legs up around the man. Instantly their hard lengths were pressed together and Will found himself gasping again. It felt so good. He hadn’t been intimate with someone in a long time, and rarely at that. And this was all the more amazing for being with the man he was falling in love with. Who he was sure he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

“Will,” Hannibal groaned against his neck, their clothes bunching between them as Hannibal began to rock.

“Ungg, yeah, that’s good… Oh fuck.” Will shuddered, sure he was going to come like a teenager at any moment as Hannibal rut them together.

Then Hannibal was perched on his elbows, his hands either side of Will’s face as he drew them together for a kiss. He slowed their rhythm, gently rocking them together until Will was moaning into his mouth.

Will could feel himself edging closer and closer until he finally had to break the kiss, crying out.

“Oh, god, I’m so close, Hannibal…” He tightened his legs and Hannibal braced himself a little more on his knees, before starting to fuck against Will. Harder and faster, the friction between them even inside their clothes, was mind blowing.

Will came with a something between a cry and a sob. Shaking as Hannibal began to slow.

“N-no,” Will shook his head, “Keep going… I want you to… I want to see your face.” Will told him.

Hannibal grunted and buried his face against Will’s neck as he thrust a few more times. Will could feel the way the motion spread his come inside his pants, thinking about how Hannibal was about to come inside his beautiful clothes.

And then he was there, Hannibal cried out against Will’s neck, panting and shaking as he pulled back and let Will witness the ecstasy on his face.

There was a few minutes of silence between them as Hannibal lay heavily on top of him. In the end, Will stroked the nape of his neck and suggested, “We should grab a shower.”

Hannibal murmured his agreement but was slow to move.

“Only if we stay naked and spend the rest of the day in bed. I find myself wishing to explore you thoroughly, discover all your likes and dislikes before I… get to know you all the more. Before you perhaps get to know me that way too.”

There wasn’t really a question there and Will shuddered at the words, finding himself nodding fervently.

*

Will's shitty apartment was not anywhere he expected to find Hannibal Lecter, much less in his bed.

But the man was there, sleeping soundly next to him, practically on top of him in the tiny single bed.

Morning dawned and the sun shone through the window they'd forgotten to draw a curtain on before falling into a satisfied sleep. It had woken Will, but Hannibal was still snoring gently.

Rather than go to his job, Will had stayed in bed with Hannibal and done as suggested. Hannibal seemed to have catalogued every inch of his body with fingers and mouth, including his prostate. Before encouraging Will to do the same in return.

By the end of it, Will had been exhausted but ravenous to be taken by the man. Hannibal had denied him in this, saying that it could wait. That he wanted it to be special. Back at Murderland, in their own room with music and candles and a whole bunch of other shit that Will laughed at but also found he wanted. He wanted to be special to someone, always had. And now he had that.

Hannibal's head rested on Will's chest, so he ran his fingers up the man's neck and into his hair, gently stroking there. Absentmindedly.

Will wasn't sure how long they lay there like that, but after a while Hannibal's breathing started to even out, and his cock started to harden against Will's leg.

"What shall we do today?" Will teased, hoping the answer would be more sex, but very sure that Hannibal had his own plans all mapped out. Hannibal moved slightly, his lips trailing across Will's chest.

"Pack your bags, we can go see my gift on our way back to Murderland." Hannibal murmured against his throat, between lacing kisses.

"I expect the body will have been removed now." Will moaned out the reply, his cock now twitching too. "We'll have to skip it this time."

He gasped when Hannibal's hand took firm hold of his cock and began to stroke, "It won't be the last love note I give you, mylimasis."

Will whimpered and lay back against the pillows as Hannibal renewed his explorations.

Epilogue - One Year Later

Will waited by the door, package in hand and ready to start in with his little routine.

He'd had a while to get used to it now, and in truth he enjoyed it. He liked to be the one to oversee and guide the 'special agents'. He got to fulfil his dream every day. Being Agent Will Graham and being… something else as well. Something that enabled him to develop the most entertaining scenarios for the paying customers.

And Hannibal indulged him terribly, in every sense. Giving him free reign in this and so much more. He chose their kills, selecting scum like Mason Verger, that people would rejoice at the loss of. In every way he was fulfilled.

As expected, the knock came, and Will pulled the door open.

He was about to start into his rushed thanks for the agent joining them and start the game rolling, but he hesitated for just a moment. The new agent was young, much younger than he would have expected. He knew she was in her first year of college, but she looked so young despite how she held herself like someone determined not to be a victim.

He'd read her file, knew her tragic background and arguably the reason for her interest in Murderland. Her interest in studying criminal psychology and that, clearly, she had spent some of her savings from her inheritance on indulging her desire to be part of a crime scene. Perhaps to exorcise demons, Will had thought.

Had. Now meeting her in person he saw something else there. A different level of interest, and one that he knew well.

She looked up at him expectantly from the step and he reached out his hand to shake hers.

"Special Agent Hobbs, glad you could make it. We're sorely in need of your expertise."

Chapter End Notes

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